Washington Decides to Do Business with Gorbachev

Mikhail Gorbachev's first appearance on the international stage as a star in the Soviet leadership, the American administration displayed growing interest in him. At their meeting in Geneva in January 1985 to negotiate the resumption of disarmament talks, Shultz told Gromyko in private (with Reagan's approval) that even though Gorbachev was not yet general secretary, if he wanted to pay a working visit to the United States he would be received by Reagan and Shultz. Gromyko, jealous, did not bother to disguise his displeasure at the American initiative. The old guard in the Politburo regarded Gorbachev with suspicion. Shultz left it at that. Gromyko had been entrusted entirely with the conduct of foreign policy by...

The process of change in the Soviet Union was no less complex. Before Konstantin Chernenko died on March 10, 1985, Gorbachev and the other members of the Politburo were pursuing the same old foreign policy, although he began to think cautiously about the necessity of change from confrontation to businesslike relations with the West, primarily the United States. But he had to watch his step in the beginning and needed time to consolidate his power, especially in the Politburo and among the top military proponents of continued confrontation. His situation was further complicated by the fact that he was never sure what Reagan would do next, and the president's unpredictability remained a dominant factor in the Politburo's thinking right through its final session before the November summit.

When Gorbachev got control of Soviet foreign policy, it became increasingly dynamic and played a significant role in paving the way for the turn that took place at the Geneva summit. Gorbachev knew how to take propaganda advantage of the openings provided by Reagan and follow them up with major new initiatives to curb the arms race. No less important was the intensive exchange with the administration at all levels. This included personal letters between Gorbachev and Reagan; meetings and correspondence between Gorbachev's new and pragmatic Soviet foreign minister, Eduard Shevardnadze, and both the secretary of state and the president, and active working contacts through diplomatic channels that had previously been almost completely blocked.

V. The Beginning of the End of the Cold War

What the Geneva Summit Meant

The Geneva summit of November 1985 was the first in almost six years between the leaders of the Soviet Union and the United States. History may regard it as the beginning of the end of the Cold War. While the administration gave no hint that it was abandoning its basic principles, changes appeared in the thinking of Reagan about the Soviet Union. He began to depart from unconditional confrontation and display some sense of realism toward negotiation. This change resulted from a number of factors.

Washington regarded the Geneva meeting as, first and foremost, the fruit of its military buildup, which in turn underwent its tough diplomacy. But the Reagan policy of a naked military buildup and diplomatic confrontation did not bring the desired results. Its principal utility lay in rebuilding confidence within the United States and in the very mind of the president himself. It never was a realistic possibility that the new weapons could force the Soviet Union to surrender its national interests or would be used to fight the Soviet Union to the death, which is the way the president's own rhetoric sometimes made it sound. In reality, both external and domestic pressure combined to undermine the Reagan strategy. Abroad, the United States came under pressure from its allies to resume a dialogue with the Soviet Union. At home, it became increasingly difficult to ignore the concern of the American people about the dangerous state of Soviet-American relations, and this was closely reflected in the public opinion polls. Furthermore, whatever may have been the effect of the administration's military programs, they had already reached their maximum because they were well under way or nearing successful completion. It would have taken another huge turn of the screw by the Pentagon's arms planners to reach another and more threatening plateau.

The Strategic Defense Initiative was welcomed by the military-industrial complex and the right wing in the United States as a tool to shift the strategic balance in favor of the United States, and at the same time as a tactic to force the Soviet Union to spend itself into bankruptcy, whatever might be the eventual military effectiveness of this technological fantasy. At first Mikhail Gorbachev nibbled at this bait. He made SDI the number one target of his diplomatic and public attacks and proceeded with a cheaper Soviet version, though his main target always remained the same: to kill or neutralize Star Wars through diplomatic negotiations.

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From Mikhail Gorbachev's first appearance on the international stage as a rising star in the Soviet leadership, the American administration displayed growing interest in him. At their meeting in Geneva in January 1985 to negotiate the resumption of disarmament talks, Shultz told Gromyko in private (with Reagan's approval) that even though Gorbachev was not yet general secretary, if he wanted to pay a working visit to the United States he would be received by Reagan and Shultz. Gromyko, jealous, did not bother to disguise his displeasure at the American initiative. The old guard in the Politburo regarded Gorbachev with suspicion. Shultz left it at that. Gromyko had been entrusted entirely with the conduct of foreign policy by...
Chernenko, who had no interest in it. As Chernenko's health declined early in 1985, there were rumors in the Kremlin that Chernenko would be relieved of his post as chairman of the Supreme Soviet so Gromyko could fulfill its mainly ceremonial duties as president of the nation while also remaining foreign minister, which would have meant additional authority for him. Chernenko would still have retained his top post in the party. But his death changed all these plans.

Gorbachev was elected general secretary of the Communist Party on March 11, the day after Chernenko's death. The old guard was unhappy with the nomination of such a young and energetic leader—he was fifty-four—but had no plausible candidate of its own. Gromyko played a major role by suddenly suggesting Gorbachev at the crucial Politburo session, thus strongly weakening the opposition by betting on the winning horse, as he had done throughout his career. But within six months Gorbachev had fired Gromyko as foreign minister because of his inflexibility and kicked him upstairs. He finally got the presidency, but without the foreign ministry.

At the time of his election, Gorbachev had no clear-cut foreign policy, although he was dissatisfied with the lack of dynamism and the absence of room for broad strategic maneuver. Reagan's public displays of uncompromising anti-communism made it difficult for Gorbachev to develop new initiatives toward the United States with any speed.

On the very day Gorbachev was elected general secretary, we received our first hint of the changes that he might expect from the Reagan administration. Shultz visited the embassy on March 11 to sign the condolence book for Chernenko, arriving twenty minutes before president Reagan to talk with me in private. Shultz told me he and the president had met in the White House earlier that day with McFarlane and Donald Regan, the new White House Chief of Staff. The president summed up by saying that a new situation with new opportunities was emerging in Soviet-American relations and it would be unforgivable not to take advantage of it, although the outcome was hardly predictable. Just as he was starting his second term as president, a new Soviet leader had taken the helm who by all appearances would manage foreign and domestic affairs energetically. Relations with Moscow would therefore be high on the president's list of priorities. With the Geneva arms control negotiations starting, Reagan added, results were crucial.

Reagan therefore wanted to establish a dialogue at the highest level from the very beginning, and with this end in view, the president had decided to send a personal letter to Gorbachev. It would be delivered by Vice President Bush, who would head the American delegation to Chernenko's funeral in Moscow. The letter would contain an invitation to the new general secretary to visit the United States. Needless to say, Gorbachev would be received by the American government and the president himself as a guest of the highest rank, and the White House would arrange for him to tour the country at his convenience and on an itinerary of his choice. Shultz remarked that it was the Soviet leader's "turn" to visit the United States, but if Gorbachev did not find it feasible for his own reasons to leave the Soviet Union and would prefer to invite the American president to visit the Soviet Union first, Reagan would understand.

When the president arrived he did not raise these questions with me, but I took note of his remark that it was his third visit to the embassy in the course of three years on occasions of grief. "But," he added, "I hope to come to the embassy next time on a happier occasion." He also asked me to convey his personal regards to Gorbachev.

I was certainly impressed by the news I got from Shultz, and so was Gorbachev. For the first time during his presidency, Reagan had chosen to express openly, albeit through his characteristically guarded secretary of state, his desire for a summit meeting. Gorbachev instantly noted the extraordinary signal from Washington, the more so because it fitted his own plans.

The next day, McFarlane came to the embassy to sign the condolence book and repeated much of Shultz's message. He stressed that the president hoped Gorbachev would not delay the meeting so their first summit could be "mutually introductory." The prospects of a summit and the degree to which they affected American public opinion could be seen from McFarlane's remarkable confession that if the meeting were to be held at that moment Congress would be most unlikely to approve the billions being requested for the MX missile because it would see the summit as a clear turn toward better relations. He also remarked that as the president became more personally involved in U.S.-Soviet dealings, things might come to the point where the confidential channel between the White House and the Kremlin could again be put into operation. That was news, indeed.

Gorbachev received Bush on March 13 at about 10 P.M. in a majestic Kremlin hall, attended by Gromyko and Shultz. Their discussion lasted for an hour and a half. Gorbachev emphatically confirmed the Soviet Union was ready to promote good relations with Washington if it felt likewise. Bush relayed Reagan's invitation to visit the United States, for which Gorbachev thanked him but gave no definite reply because the matter had to be discussed by the Politburo. Instead he focused his attention on the talks on nuclear and space weapons which had just begun between the Soviet Union and the United States in Vienna and showed little promise.

"Is the United States really interested in achieving results at the talks or
does it need them to implement its rearmament programs?" Gorbachev asked bluntly. He stressed that the Soviet Union had never had any plans to fight the United States and had no such intention now. "There has never been any such madman in the Soviet leadership," he said. At the same time, he declared that the Soviet people would not admit to anyone lecturing them about how they should live, nor would they lecture anyone for that matter. Let history pass its judgment, he said.

Both sides left satisfied by the frank and lively conversation and convinced that the dialogue was certainly worth continuing even if it had not thrown up any new ideas and occasionally threw up contradictory thoughts. "Gorbachev is radically different from any Soviet leader I have ever met," Shultz told the press afterward.

Early in the morning of March 15, Shultz phoned me. He had arrived from Moscow a few hours before and was on his way to report to Reagan. He confirmed that Gorbachev had made a good impression with his straightforwardness, expertise, and obvious readiness to improve Soviet-American relations, and he would report all that to the president. The next day, at the annual reception in the State Department for the diplomatic corps, Shultz drew me aside to inform me that Reagan had asked him to characterize Gorbachev on the basis of their talk and compare him with other world figures. Shultz told me he had given Gorbachev high marks as a competent and dynamic leader, undoubtedly aware of his foreign policy goals and determined to spare no effort to achieve them.

The president asked Shultz to enumerate a few concrete issues that could justify a summit before American and Soviet public opinion. ("The president would hate to miss the chance," Shultz said.) Shultz suggested a resumption of Aeroflot flights, opening consulates in New York and Kiev, and agreements on cultural exchange, transport, energy, and the environment. Reagan said all that could provide an adequate basis for a first meeting, considering the tension of the last four years. I asked Shultz why the major questions of controlling the arms race on earth and in outer space were missing from his agenda, and he replied that they certainly could be discussed but there was hardly any hope of solving them at the first summit. All this sounded like a serious commitment.

Then I heard more praise from Vice President Bush, who approached me on March 19 on the White House lawn before an official welcoming ceremony which I was attending as dean of the diplomatic corps. Bush said Reagan was looking forward to Gorbachev's reply to his summit invitation, but in the meanwhile, his irrepressible anti-Soviet sentiments had reasserted themselves in a speech on a trip to Canada the previous day. I told Bush that, frankly speaking, the president's eagerness for a summit sounded far from convincing when listening to his official speeches; he seemed to favor the meeting in words but not deeds.

Bush shrugged and advised against exaggerating the importance of the president's rhetoric, which was sometimes careless. Said Bush: "Reagan is still Reagan." And indeed, as the ceremony began, the president in his welcoming speech made yet another attack on "Marxist-Leninists" and their intrigues in Central America, the Sandinista government in Nicaragua, and support from the Soviet Union and Cuba.

But despite Cold War detours—Weinberger made much of the tragic killing of an American liaison officer in East Germany by a Soviet sentry which aroused American public opinion—the administration still seemed to be following the route to the summit. On April 3, I had a talk with Senator Bob Dole, an influential Republican leader whose impression was that the White House increasingly believed that a summit would take place sooner or later, which Dole saw as a big plus because it would mean a collapse of the policy advocated by the extreme right-wingers around Reagan. Meeting Gorbachev at the summit would amount to an admission by Reagan that the policy of confrontation he had followed during his first term had not quite worked and had to be adjusted. Dole therefore saw a summit as potentially very important for the next presidential election because it would weaken the wave of bellicose ultraconservatism in the country. I particularly appreciated such statements from the lips of that intelligent yet fairly conservative-minded man.

Inside the Kremlin, a summit became a matter of active debate. Gorbachev did not share the view of the former Soviet leadership that such a meeting had to deliver a serious agreement to be counted a success.

"If you make it a rule," Gorbachev told his fellow members of the Politburo, "the summit will not be held earlier than in two or three years. Probably, it will not take place at all. Now, time is short. We need a summit to get to know Reagan and his plans and, most important, to launch a personal dialogue with the American president."

His point of view did not appeal to Gromyko, but the foreign minister was in no position to impose his views upon the new and energetic general secretary. Gorbachev began his side of the correspondence with Reagan by endorsing a summit, and his letter was free of polemics. Gorbachev urged a businesslike approach and said a summit would not necessarily have to adopt any major documents; the main thing was to create mutual understanding on the basis of equality and each other's legitimate interests. This represented
a turning point from the old Kremlin position on summits, and it was per-
ceived as such by Reagan and Shultz, and Gorbachev came out publicly for a
summit on April 8 in Pravda. The Soviet people welcomed it.

Before I left for Moscow to attend the Central Committee Plenum
Shultz invited me to discuss the reply they were preparing for Reagan, which
he promised would be as constructive as Gorbachev's letter. While Reagan
would not insist on signed agreements, he would suggest a businesslike
approach to our disputes, cooperation in regional problems, and other op-
opportunities in the Geneva negotiations, the Stockholm conference, non-
proliferation of nuclear weapons, the Vienna talks on troop reductions in
Central Europe, and controls on chemical warfare. The letter itself was
drafted skillfully to examine our positions critically and exert pressure on us.
Although Gorbachev was looking for new ways, he was not yet prepared for
concrete moves because he had to follow Gromyko's well-beaten diplomatic
path until he could map out his own and obtain the approval of the
Politburo.

Gorbachev Addresses Soviet Foreign Policy

During the Plenum on April 23, Gorbachev made a routine attack on
Reagan's foreign policy for increasing world tension and expressed the hope
that it would shift enough to open the way for his personal meeting with the
president. When he invited me for a private chat, he showed himself to be a
mixture of traditional attitudes and great personal curiosity with a distrust of
our dogmatic ways and the potential for flexibility. It was my first private and
informal conversation with him as general secretary. His manner was artless
and natural. He easily shared his views on Soviet-American relations and
asked many questions. He was interested in every minor detail about
America.

Two of Gorbachev's ideas stand out, and they were not all that uncon-
ventional for a Soviet leader. First, he strongly believed we could not gain
victory "over imperialism" by force of arms, nor could we solve our domestic
problems without ending the arms race. Second, we had to try to oust the
maximum possible number Americans troops from Western Europe. The
most effective way to achieve that was to ease international tension and carry
out a stage-by-stage withdrawal of Soviet and American troops from Europe.
For the Americans, that would mean returning home across the ocean; but
for us, a withdrawal only several hundred kilometers behind our borders,
where the presence of our troops would be felt almost palpably by European
states. These were the first shoots of Gorbachev's new thinking in foreign
policy.

As for the United States, he told me we should spare no effort to reverse
the hostility in our relations, avoid arguments about ideology, and focus on
normalizing and broadening our relations with Washington. I was to be
guided by this in my capacity as ambassador, and my first task was to arrange
a summit with Reagan. He emphasized that these were his personal instruc-
tions; for me they were like a gust of fresh air in the dense fog of recent years.

Gorbachev was keenly interested in knowing what kind of man Reagan
was. He did not doubt Reagan's anti-Soviet predisposition, but was the pres-
ident open to persuasion or was he just hopeless? Was he an anti-communist
fanatic or a pragmatist? Could one come to terms with him or would it be
worthless to try?

I told him that for all the hostility we had seen in Reagan's first term,
during the past year or so, the first signs of pragmatism had begun to appear,
and even a vague and unstable measure of interest in establishing contacts
with the Soviet Union at the highest level. Could it be that, in his own pecu-
lar way, he had undergone the same sort of evolution in relation to the
Soviet Union as Nixon? Maybe, but it was hard to say. My personal experi-
ence showed me that it was possible to talk reasonably enough with Reagan.
"But then," I noted to Gorbachev, "Reagan had not held a single meeting
with Soviet leaders, except for Gromyko—who is a peculiar man himself.
One has to have a way with him."

I recommended strongly to Gorbachev that he meet with Reagan. "It
goes without saying you cannot guarantee good results," I added, "but I
think we can win much more than we lose as far as our bilateral relations are
concerned."

Gorbachev agreed. As we talked, he did not hide his displeasure at
Gromyko's conservative, dogmatic approach to the vital problems of Soviet
foreign policy, particularly in relation to the United States. He evidently had
already decided to replace him and had not forgotten Gromyko's criticisms
of his trip to Britain, where Gorbachev, who had not yet been elected general
secretary, was the first Soviet party leader in the postwar era to evoke a gen-
uinely benevolent reaction. Gromyko had been unusually careless in telling
some of his old Politburo colleagues that he believed Gorbachev had behaved
as a publicity-seeker. Gromyko simultaneously reprimanded several Soviet
ambassadors in Western countries, including me, for too favorable reporting
back to Moscow with the favorable Western response to Gorbachev's visit.
Gorbachev soon found out about these reproaches and long remembered
them.

I should note that members of the Politburo were keenly and even com-
petitively interested in their foreign press notices. Embassies relayed foreign
press reports and comments about their trips abroad and the visits of foreign
dignitaries to Moscow, and so would our news agency Tass. Its reports would be edited in Moscow and when necessary sanitized before being distributed, but the full versions would be passed to the Politburo, where they would be read as a measure of success or failure by the member who had made the trip or received the visitor.

Soon after becoming general secretary, Gorbachev symbolically departed from the habits of his predecessors and began to entrust foreign policy issues not only to Gromyko, but to Boris Ponomarev, the Central Committee secretary for international party relations. He did not do this because he especially appreciated Ponomarev's work (he did not), but mostly to make it clear to Gromyko that the party had its own foreign policy department and it could provide different views for the general secretary, who could accept them. That deliberate snub showed Gromyko's monopoly on foreign policy was near its end.

Shultz and Gromyko met in Vienna on May 14 amidst festive celebrations of a quarter-century of Austria's postwar independence. They discussed a broad range of problems but focused on the Geneva negotiations on nuclear and space weapons. The conversation lasted for six hours and was detailed yet fruitless. It was not until the end of the conversation that the question emerged that was on everybody's mind, that of the summit. Neither wanted to be first to raise it lest he display an undiplomatic zeal, so the two ministers played essentially an unnecessary diplomatic game. Shultz outlasted him.

Since Gromyko had clear instructions from Gorbachev to discuss the matter, he finally was forced to raise the question of the place and time. Gorbachev was proposing a summit in November in Moscow. Shultz said it was the Soviet leader's turn to come to Washington. Gromyko declined, proposing Europe instead because Gorbachev, only a few months in office, was unwilling to go to Washington lest it appear that he was paying court to Reagan.

Shultz reported back to Reagan, which touched off a debate within the administration. While mid-November was acceptable for the meeting, Reagan urged Gorbachev to hold it in one of the two capitals. He also promised to restrain himself from verbal attacks and join in the preparation of agreements.

Thus the summit was taking shape, and as it did, Weinberger and conservatives in the administration and Congress attacked the Soviet Union for failing to comply with the SALT II agreements (whose ratification they themselves had opposed). They called on Reagan to ignore the agreements and withdraw from the ABM Treaty as long as they stood in the way of the U.S. military buildup. Reagan issued an ambiguous statement, saying he would not ignore the agreements as long as the Soviet Union stood by them but left himself the option of commissioning a new nuclear submarine whose missiles would exceed the SALT II limits. Tass then issued a statement warning that if Reagan abrogated the treaty it could have serious consequences, and matters degenerated again into a kind of diplomatic trench warfare.

Finally on June 17 I had a meeting with Shultz that showed we were heading into the final stages of a summit arrangement. With McFarlane and Paul Nitze present, Shultz said the president reluctantly accepted Gorbachev's proposal to meet in a third country, and suggested Geneva. Then he read from a text which boiled down to the idea that the United States was ready to slow its Star Wars program in exchange for a Soviet agreement to make sizable cuts in its strategic missiles. The rationale for this was that if the Soviet force of offensive missiles were reduced, the United States could then justify slowing down SDI, which it regarded as a defensive project. This was really a sort of compromise within the administration between Shultz and Weinberger rather than a compromise with us, because Weinberger had started out by refusing to accept any limits at all on SDI. We of course had always assumed that the size of missile forces would be on the table in negotiations.

But there was another attraction for us. Shultz said he was authorized by the president to propose that he and I conduct through the confidential channel a discussion "in a broad, philosophical sense" of the key arms control questions already under negotiation in Geneva. The exchange could be continued by him and Gromyko late in July, when the two foreign ministers were due to meet in Helsinki for the next Conference on European Security and Cooperation.

I recommended to Moscow that we accept this framework for discussion because it meant that Shultz proposed to reactivate the confidential channel. I thought it meant that the administration was serious about dialogue following Reagan's reelection, although that remained to be proven. Two weeks later Moscow accepted November 19–20 in Geneva as the date and place for the summit, but declined the confidential discussions in favor of continuing to work through the regular Geneva arms negotiators.

Shultz described our reply as disappointing. What he did not know was that it had been drafted by Gromyko, who refused to countenance any repetition of secret personal negotiations in the style developed by Kissinger and me, and which he personally disliked because it devalued his own role. He had convinced Gorbachev that philosophical discussions would only result in drawing us into protracted negotiations—and eventually into tacitly acquiescing in Star Wars simply by agreeing to talk about Reagan's pet project.
The Turn Begins

When the announcement of the summit was published in the two capitals early in July, Moscow added a piece of news that attracted every bit as much attention worldwide. Gromyko was to be relieved of his job as foreign minister. Because of Gromyko's help in electing Gorbachev, he was not forced to retire—that happened three years later—but was elected chairman of the Supreme Soviet of the Soviet Union, formally the highest position in the state but with no great political influence and largely ceremonial duties. Gorbachev, on the eve of his first serious dialogue with the United States, thus rid himself of a minister who was a burden to him, whom he disliked, and whose presence and authority stood in the way of the incipient new thinking prompted by Gorbachev in Soviet foreign policy.

Gromyko's departure after almost thirty years marked the end of an epoch. Speaking from long and close personal experience, I can testify that behind his stern and forbidding appearance was a rather kind-hearted man, loyal to his fellow workers, devoted to his work, and displaying high professional competence. For all his shortcomings, he earned the respect of his associates and foreign counterparts. In his own way, Gromyko was convinced abstract notions could be a serious factor in policy, or in the possibility of early threats of a new war, particularly a nuclear war. That did not prevent him from being a prominent Soviet Cold War crusader, especially when he believed that our interests were threatened. He was a committed member of the party, loyally upheld communist, ideas and believed in their final victory. All that was deeply rooted in his thinking and his code of conduct. But when new developments and a rapid transformation of the world called for a new approach, he gradually became an obstacle to the Soviet diplomacy he had directed for so many years. He finally realized this and suffered for it in his heart of hearts, but he knew there was no way he could reform himself.

The old-line thinking was of course not just a failing of Gromyko. Boris Ponomarev, head of the international department of the party's Central Committee, for instance, drafted the foreign policy section of the Politburo reports to the Twenty-Seventh Congress early in 1986. But the editing committee criticized it for failing to reflect the new approach and our "new thinking" in foreign policy and falling back on old clichés. Indignant, Ponomarev replied, "What new thinking! Our thinking is right. Let the Americans change their thinking. What Gorbachev says abroad is meant exclusively for them, for the West!"

In choosing Gromyko's successor, Gorbachev reverted to an old tradition in the Soviet Union and many Western countries of picking a politician instead of a diplomat. I was later told by members of the Politburo that my name and that of Georgi Kornienko, Gromyko's deputy were mentioned by Gorbachev as good possibilities. But then he told the Politburo that it was time for foreign affairs to be managed directly by the party and that is why the job had to be filled by a member of the party leadership.

But by party leader he did not mean a Kremlin insider. Quite the contrary. Much to everyone's surprise, he named Eduard Shevardnadze, the first secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Republic of Georgia, and evaluated him very highly to the amazement of Politburo members. Shevardnadze had never held any positions in Moscow and had spent his career in Georgia. Besides, he had no diplomatic experience whatever. Gorbachev did not attach much importance to that and said, "He'll live to learn." He believed it important to have an intelligent man by his side who was not burdened by the old policy stereotypes and was ready to put his new designs into practice. Gorbachev also needed a like-minded man in the Politburo, where his new thinking in foreign policy was by no means universally shared.

Gorbachev knew that he could completely rely on Shevardnadze. They were old acquaintances dating back a quarter of a century to their days in the Young Communist League and had become friends while working as party secretaries in large neighboring regions in the south of the Soviet Union, Gorbachev in Stavropol and Shevardnadze in Georgia. That Shevardnadze did not have his own connections inside the Kremlin leadership network...
suited Gorbachev, because the new foreign minister’s position as an outsider helped ensure his personal loyalty to the general secretary.

They worked hand in glove. It was not long before the Gorbachev-Shevardnadze tandem came to determine the country’s foreign policy in its entirety, gradually pushing the rest of the Politburo into the background, where its collective opinion was no longer of crucial importance. This was especially evident during the last years of Gorbachev’s rule, until Shevardnadze resigned his post in 1990. But the actions of this dynamic tandem were not always well thought out, not by a long shot, and in no small measure that was due to Shevardnadze’s readiness to follow Gorbachev’s rush to compromise for agreements with the West without much expertise provided by professional diplomats from the Foreign Ministry.

The same Plenum that replaced Gromyko as foreign minister—he remained a Politburo member until his retirement in 1988—elected two new secretaries of the Central Committee: Boris Yeltsin, the former first secretary of the Sverdlovsk region, who was charged with construction, and Lev Zaikov, who was given control of the defense industry. Zaikov later became the head of the Politburo troika overseeing negotiations on nuclear and conventional weapons. The other two members were Shevardnadze and Defense Minister Sergei Sokolov, representing the two ministries who were locked in competition over arms policy (just as in Washington). Zaikov, and later his successor Dimitri Yazov, were instructed by Gorbachev to reconcile the positions of the two departments and compromise them.

I first met Shevardnadze, who was already serving as minister, during my summer leave in Moscow, and he made a favorable impression on me. He inquired about the United States in minute detail and was interested in our relations. I noted that he was not so much interested in the problems as such, but in the ways that they might be solved through mutual compromise. I somehow found a common language with him much faster than with Gromyko, whose long-established views were hard to change. I also liked the way Shevardnadze did not try to hide his lack of diplomatic experience and felt free to ask all kinds of questions without heed to his ministerial prestige.

Shevardnadze suggested that I accompany him to the foreign ministers’ conference at the end of July marking the tenth anniversary of the Helsinki Final Act, to help him in his diplomatic baptism of fire abroad. I of course agreed. He was surprised at the tone of a speech Shultz had made there on human rights in the Soviet Union which he felt had exceeded all the habitual limits of hostility. Shevardnadze was more conciliatory, and when he finally met Shultz at Helsinki, he asked his American counterpart, “Did you really have to make such a speech?”

Shultz seemed very complacent and quite satisfied by the mass of publicity the speech had received in the United States. But Shevardnadze clearly realized that such public statements by the secretary of state made it more difficult for him and Gorbachev to search within the Politburo for a flexible new approach toward the Reagan administration. Shultz also seemed interested in scoring points on Gorbachev’s decision to ban all Soviet nuclear explosions starting August 6, which had been announced in Moscow. The secretary of state responded publicly that unless the nuclear tests were put under control, there was no way of knowing whether the Soviet Union was observing its own moratorium. Moscow angrily retorted that it was better to discontinue nuclear explosions than monitor the way they were being carried out.

The private meeting dealt mostly with preparations for the Gorbachev-Reagan summit. Shultz and Shevardnadze came no closer to resolving the problems that divided us, but the atmosphere was noticeably more friendly than during similar meetings with Gromyko, and Shevardnadze came away with an appreciation of Shultz’s professionalism and the personal contact with him. At the end of the meeting, Shevardnadze thanked me, confiding that many senior diplomats in the Foreign Ministry were treating him coolly and not offering help as I had.

**A Frustrating Climb Toward the Summit**

When I returned to Washington I called on Shultz on September 10 to discuss preparations for the summit. The essence of our problem was that the administration in general and Ronald Reagan in particular still did not yet have a clear vision of the summit, its agenda, and its possible results. The State Department and the Pentagon held different views; if the former wanted some agreement or at least a generally positive outcome, the latter had no interest at all. Weinberger’s followers fought to the last to prevent their president from yielding on what they believed were his most deeply held principles, and first of all on SDI.

It was evident that Reagan and his wife were more concerned with the atmospherics of the summit than its essential issues, and this was to bedevil our preparations until the very moment we arrived in Geneva. Shultz told me that the president preferred not to host his dinner in the “sterility” of the U.S. mission in Geneva but at the Aga Khan’s villa for an easy chat. In Washington Shultz handed me a personal letter from Nancy Reagan to Raisa Gorbachev expressing her hope for an early meeting and confidence that “we, the wives” were eager to do their utmost to improve relations between the Soviet and American people.

But on substantive questions, I got no reply. Shultz said the administration was not yet prepared even to discuss a joint declaration on the nonpro-
liferation of nuclear weapons—which had been proposed by the Americans themselves. It was evident that the State Department was still awaiting summit instructions from the White House. Senator Robert Byrd informed me of a struggle over the main question of concessions on SDI in exchange for a radical reduction of strategic missiles. The hard-liners opposed any agreement and had reduced the matter to a propaganda battle; they believed Gorbachev had scored more points and now Reagan should do his utmost to catch up.

On September 16, I had another conversation with Shultz, who insisted that the president was serious about a successful meeting. But he confessed that the American leadership was still in the dark about what results it expected. Frankly speaking, his own inactivity seemed inexplicable to me. Foreign ministers were supposed to play a leading role in preparing summit meetings, or at least they always did in the past, but I did not fully realize that his hands were tied by the struggle around the president.

Ambassador Hartman, who was back from Moscow for consultations, told me that Reagan would pay due attention to disarmament problems but he also intended to stress the need for mutual restraint by one side in regions where the other had important interests, a strategy persistently advocated by Richard Nixon. But Hartman also told me something about Reagan's preparations that helped explain why we had made so little progress with the summit only about two months away. In order to keep abreast of the times, Reagan was examining history to obtain a better idea of "the Russian soul," the Soviet Union, and the motives behind its policy. Almost daily he leafed through illustrated booklets about the Soviet Union—he disdained thick books—and read official summaries prepared for him. But he preferred oral reports and stories from people who had lived in the Soviet Union, especially those who had met Soviet leaders. Hartman remarked in passing that Reagan's choice of storytellers might appear dubious but that was up to the president; among them were dissidents who had settled in the United States.

While Shultz seemed to be unhurried, Weinberger lost no time pressing for Star Wars. He convinced Reagan to take another step, and on September 23 the White House announced the organization of the American Armed Forces' United Space Command. All that caused irritation in Moscow. Shevardnadze declared before the United Nations that all responsibility for the crisis in international relations lay with the United States.

But Gorbachev had no intention of engaging in a fruitless public wrangle with Reagan and preferred to maintain his diplomatic initiative. On September 27 he had Shevardnadze hand the White House new Soviet proposals for the summit and for the Geneva negotiations on nuclear and space weapons that were already under way. First he formally proposed a tradeoff:

- cut in half the number of long-range nuclear missiles capable of reaching each other's territory in exchange for a complete ban on weapons that could strike from outer space; that would mean a reduction of up to six thousand nuclear warheads. Then he suggested separate negotiations on medium-range missiles in Europe drawing in Britain and France; meanwhile the Soviet Union was putting a ceiling on the number of its SS-20 missiles on combat alert in Europe, and scrapping or removing its obsolete SS-4 and SS-5 missiles. Europe, said Gorbachev, was entitled to expect the United States to respond in kind.

- The Soviet proposals had been designed to reach a compromise, and they put the American administration in a difficult position. On October 4 a White House spokesman angrily said the United States did not intend to respond in public, and the next day Weinberger reaffirmed doggedly that the American administration could not negotiate with the Soviet Union about SDI. Shultz made no public statement at all.

- Gorbachev's proposals divided the administration anew. Shultz saw the propaganda advantages to the Soviet Union and suggested the United States respond because drastic cuts in Soviet strategic forces would restrain the future deployment of American missiles. Weinberger and the Pentagon insisted on their crash program for SDI. Reagan could not make up his mind. The intensifying debate within the administration focused on the 1972 ABM agreement, which through more than a decade had been interpreted narrowly by all administrations to legitimizing a star wars system. Pentagon lawyers argued otherwise, giving a broader interpretation. The controversy spread through the administration, Congress, and the media.

- In October a Solomonic solution was worked out by Shultz and McFarlane and approved by Reagan. It said that from a legal point of view the broad interpretation was well justified, but the SDI program would be developed within the traditional narrow interpretation. Still the struggle went on, to the alarm of the European allies over the future of the ABM agreement. It goes without saying the Soviet Union vigorously supported the narrow interpretation, and meanwhile the Gorbachev proposals consolidated our propaganda positions.

- McFarlane admitted to me late in September that the president believed Gorbachev was waging a propaganda war in the hope of forcing him into concessions on vital questions of nuclear arms. The president had to give Gorbachev his due: unlike his predecessors, the new Soviet leader could skillfully use public opinion against his foreign opponents, even in their own countries. But McFarlane warned us not to overestimate the influence of public opinion on the president. Reagan was a man of stubborn views and would hardly make concessions under public pressure. To me it was evident...
that the White House was for the first time feeling a thrashing by the very weapons of propaganda it knew how to wield so well.

That may have made Reagan consider more serious negotiations. During their last meeting in September, Reagan and Shevardnadze raised the subject of establishing a confidential channel to prepare for the summit, but Reagan had failed then to name the person he wanted to operate the American end. Now McFarlane was authorized by the president to say it would be him and me. He remarked fleetingly that the president felt Shultz, who was very busy with other matters, had not used it in full measure. But McFarlane intended to make the utmost use of the channel.

I knew that McFarlane was a kind of White House buffer between the rival views of Weinberger and Shultz, although he leaned toward the views of the secretary of state. After Reagan's reelection McFarlane began to convince the president that his summit with Gorbachev would benefit the United States—a mood that was evident during my conversations with him. The president's wife was also eager for the summit to succeed and ensure her husband's place in history. Had it not been for their personal pressure on Reagan, Shultz alone would have found it difficult to bring the president successfully to the summit.

George Bush played a role in the summit because he saw it as part of a determined campaign to succeed Reagan as president at the next election in 1988. We talked frankly on October 9, and it was evident that he was looking for help from the Soviet Union to create a better atmosphere. Bush said he would like to establish a closer relationship with Gorbachev and added in a light but unmistakable tone that it ought to matter to the general secretary what kind of president he would have to deal with in the future for four or perhaps eight years. Bush proposed visiting the Soviet Union in 1986 as vice president to meet Gorbachev, thus promoting his chances of nomination and election and simultaneously promoting an important agreement on nuclear disarmament between the Soviet Union and the United States—a mood that was evident during my conversations with him. The president's wife was also eager for the summit to succeed and ensure her husband's place in history. Had it not been for their personal pressure on Reagan, Shultz alone would have found it difficult to bring the president successfully to the summit.

The main thing, Bush said, was to draw a dividing line between the permissible and the impermissible. I immediately replied that the ABM agreement made it possible to draw that line.

"That may be so," Bush remarked, "but Reagan is convinced, or he has let someone convince him, that the line should begin by deploying, rather than developing and testing, the weapons systems."

After some hesitation, Bush mentioned another of Reagan's congenital peculiarities: the president found it hard simultaneously to think and to express his own ideas. This meant that whenever Reagan was ardently advocating an idea be it right or wrong, he hardly grasped what his opponent was saying. He needed some time to digest the ideas and arguments coming at him from the other side. For that reason, Bush believed the first summit should above all put into Reagan's head some different ideas from the ones that he held so tenaciously. In short, another summit would be needed to reach more tangible agreements unless world events were to spring some surprises in the interim. I had to admit he had a good point.

Bush also discussed his political problems. He knew that serving as Reagan's vice president had cost him much of his identity in the eyes of the public and thus damaged his acceptability by the center and even those to the left of center. He said he meant to regain that identity in a year or two to create a broader political base with the help of better and deeper connections with the Republican Party on the local level than Jack Kemp, Bob Dole, and Howard Baker, who lacked international experience and financial support.

Bush asked me to inform Gorbachev about our conversation and hoped to visit him for a detailed talk. I believed Bush had good presidential prospects, and I so informed Gorbachev.

One reason was that he was a politician who could swing with the wind. Several months later, in February of 1986, we met at a reception and chatted again about politics. I joked that I was not sure whether to congratulate or commiserate with him about his sudden conversion to a strong conservatism that had earned praise from even from those who had never before been his political allies. Bush said I knew enough about America's political morals to understand his behavior. "I don't conceal the fact," he went on, "that I want to be president. But, like it or not, America has swung strongly to conservatism. A man who is reputed to be a liberal now has no chance to become president, let alone the Republican nomination, which he won't gain under any circumstances. I have no choice but to reckon with that."

Bush told me that he had not changed his views on the need to improve relations with the Soviet Union although for obvious reasons he did not publicize them. "I follow the activity of your new general secretary with great interest," he said. "He has political imagination and boldness. Our roads may meet some day, for all I know." Bush's words came true, although both of them had to wait several years.

Despite all this internal pressure on Reagan, there was little evidence of give-and-take in Washington as the summit date neared. On October 10, before I left for a brief visit to Moscow to discuss preparations, I met with Shultz, who suggested that it might be useful for him to visit Moscow to discuss the summit. He informed me of some housekeeping details such as the meeting
at which Reagan and Gorbachev would exchange gifts, and the composition of
the American delegation. Three days later Reagan went on the radio to
discuss arms limitation. He came out with the same old claim that the
United States was lagging behind the Soviet Union in the strategic nuclear
arms race and that the strategic balance had to be restored first of all.

When I returned from Moscow I told Shultz his prospective visit was
being considered and things looked positive. Shultz told me that “these
White House guys,” lacking any interest in a productive Geneva summit,
had prepared a draft speech for Reagan at the jubilee session of the United
Nations with a reference to “bombs against the Soviet Union.” But Reagan,
much to Shultz’s satisfaction, rejected the draft because it was likely to spoil
his relationship with Gorbachev, provoke a public quarrel, and probably
make a mess of the summit.

Still no definite statements on space and disarmament appeared, and
instead Shultz talked up the president’s common sense, his desire to continue
the dialogue with Gorbachev after the summit, and his eagerness—along
with Nancy Reagan’s—to visit Moscow before the end of his presidential
term. Shultz made a personal request if permission for his Moscow trip came
through: he wanted to buy a couple of icons. Historic value was secondary;
what mattered was they must look handsome. One was for him, the other
for Nancy Reagan, who longed to have one of these famous Russian religious
objects. I told him that could be arranged.

On October 22, McFarlane told me at dinner that Reagan had finally
started to prepare for the summit in earnest. He had already examined eleven
reference materials about Gorbachev and his political views and had gone
through several rehearsals for their talks. A number of NSC meetings had
been devoted to preparations for the summit. Reagan also consulted his old
California adviser Richard Nixon.

Gorbachev then decided to take charge of our summit preparations and
invited Shultz to Moscow. He arrived November 4, accompanied by
McFarlane. Gorbachev invited me to take part in the meeting the next day in
his fairly modest office in the Central Committee rather than in the
grandeur of the Kremlin, thus accentuating the businesslike character of the
meeting.

Gorbachev was somewhat agitated. One hour before the meeting he
called in Shevardnadze and me. He was obviously irritated that while only
two weeks remained before his meeting with Reagan, its agenda and possible
outcome were still unclear despite preparatory meetings with Shultz and
even Reagan himself. “We hear nothing from the Americans but generalities,”
said Gorbachev, stressing that a mere introductory meeting with the
president to satisfy protocol would not suit him. He wanted something more
substantial, more tangible to convince the skeptical members of the
Politburo that the meeting was worthwhile. At the same time, Reagan’s pub-
ic statements sometimes sounded as if nothing was happening at all.

Gorbachev also wondered why the confidential channel was virtually
out of operation, and I explained that quiet diplomacy was basically alien to
the Reagan administration, although it seemed to be changing. “We’ll see,” I
said. “What Reagan says in that channel is what counts in the final analysis.”
I urged Gorbachev to press Shultz strongly to find out what was on the presi-
dent’s mind. Gorbachev agreed and said, “Well, let’s see what Secretary of
State Shultz has got to tell us.”

We had a long and difficult discussion. Gorbachev and Shultz spent
some time on an almost philosophical discussion of the erroneous illusions
cherished by both their governments about each other’s weaknesses, which
each tried to use to its own advantage. Gorbachev was especially critical of
this tactic. He also spoke emphatically in favor of better relations and
stressed the need to reach agreement on nuclear and space weapons. He put
special emphasis on SDI and criticized it severely—undoing it, I thought,
because that would merely reinforce Reagan’s belief in its importance.

However, all Gorbachev’s attempts were of no avail to search out areas
of agreement for the summit with Shultz, who talked in his characteristic
generals, making noncommittal declarations about the importance of the
summit in itself. He also did not fail to raise the subject of human rights,
which Gorbachev simply declined to discuss again. It certainly gave
Gorbachev a more realistic view of what to expect. Later Gorbachev told me
he liked Shultz’s general ideas about economic problems, upon which they
touched during the conversation and which were increasingly attracting his
interest. On that subject he willingly would talk with Shultz in the future.

Shultz for his part was impressed by Gorbachev’s dynamism. Our em-
bassy learned that after his meeting in Moscow Shultz sounded worried that
the summit might be marked by new, still stronger pressure from Gorbachev
on disarmament; that would put Reagan in a difficult position and give the
propaganda advantage to Gorbachev. Once he learned that, Gorbachev told
me he did not want Reagan to regard the summit as a great propaganda
battle. On the contrary, he felt the summit should be an introductory,
get-acquainted meeting to sound out Reagan’s intentions and avoid
confrontational talk, although Gorbachev was certainly going to state his
views clearly. After all, the Geneva summit was meant to be more of a spring
board to develop new relations with Reagan. “You can’t expect much yet,”
Gorbachev stressed.

When he reported to the Politburo on his meeting with Shultz, the dis-
appointed Gorbachev admitted that he had failed to engage the secretary of
state in a concrete conversation about the key questions; it appeared that Shultz “did not have serious baggage” for the summit. These impressions enabled him to reduce the unduly high expectations in the Politburo, which gave him a free hand to have a more informal talk with the president.

Shultz was satisfied, even relieved, when I briefed him back in Washington on November 7 about Gorbachev’s approach to the summit. I told Shultz that the president could expect a solid conversation without each side trying to corner the other or arguing for the sake of arguing, although the essential questions were to be discussed frankly and in detail, with all the seriousness they deserved.

He told me that he had reported to the president on his Moscow meeting with Gorbachev, and Reagan had asked many questions. He was curious about the substance of the discussion and about Gorbachev’s manner, his tolerance to objections, the quickness of his mind and reaction, his sense of humor, his expertise in various subjects. Reagan told Shultz it would be good to arrange for Gorbachev’s visit to Washington in July of the following year, on the understanding that the president’s turn to visit Moscow would come next. This I reported to Moscow with the recommendation that a public declaration agreeing to regular summit meetings would in itself be a worthy result of the summit. The Politburo approved.

Then Shultz and I conducted a detailed review of all the questions on the agenda, concentrating on possible agreements and joint documents. The basic document would be a joint statement to be drafted by officials of his department and my embassy. And so it was done.

But on November 13 Shultz told me about a new and unexpected obstacle. Summit opponents within the administration had fed Reagan arguments against preliminary joint drafting of the communique even though much work had already been done. But the president bought the argument that it was wrong to work on the text of a communique before a meeting because that meant the diplomats would be imposing on the two leaders some preliminary work by both sides on the communique. The president believed this work should be stopped pending the summit. Then it was urgently instructed to Moscow to halt all preparatory work with the knowledge of the heads of the department and my embassy. And so it was done.

I knew that Richard Nixon had shared his own summit experience with Reagan, and just before we left for Geneva Donald Kendall filled me in on the former president’s reactions. (McFarlane had sounded out Kendall as a possible U.S. ambassador to Moscow; he would have been a good choice but it would have been a thankless task under Reagan and he pleaded the press of business obligations anyway.) Nixon was critical of the way Reagan prepared for the summit: Reagan had a poor knowledge of details, especially concerning disarmament, and had to depend on his aides and experts. McFarlane strongly recommended that the president conduct a general, essentially philosophical conversation, believing that would be on safe ground from which he could defend himself against Gorbachev and avoid discussing concrete points. Nixon reported that many presidential aides were inclined to regard the summit mostly as a photographic session of the two superpower leaders of the contemporary world. They were trying to persuade Reagan to look at the meeting that way.

Nixon described Shultz as a more positive, serious, and knowledgeable figure, but blamed him for not exerting enough pressure on the president. Shultz was too careful, although he was one of the principal American participants preparing Reagan for the summit. Nixon talked Reagan out of taking Weinberger along, as the Secretary of Defense had come to be a symbol of uncompromising hostility toward the Soviet Union even in the United States.

Finally Nixon said with nostalgia that he wished he were in Reagan’s place because he had a historic chance to accomplish a turn in Soviet-American relations with the new general secretary, but he feared Reagan might not use it to the full.

The Soviet leadership and indeed Gorbachev himself approached the Geneva summit with high anxiety, uncertain what it would produce because it was the first one in the five years of a presidency characterized by virulent anti-Sovietism. Shultz’s visit to Moscow failed to dispel these fears. The Foreign Ministry, the Ministry of Defense, and the KGB prepared the usual joint memorandum that would form the basis of Gorbachev’s instructions for
the summit after discussion and approval by the Politburo. The memo, dated November 11, 1985, represented the full assessment by the Soviet leadership of our relations with the United States and President Reagan. It reflected the main ideas and thoughts developed by Gorbachev since coming to power, his cautious compromising mood toward the summit and, in contrast to previous documents of this sort, in language closer to ordinary speech.

It declared that the principal aim of the summit "is to try, however slim the chance may be, to find a common language with the American president on the key question of his preparedness to build relations with the Soviet Union on an equal footing, without aiming to reform each other or import ideological differences into relations between nations." It conceded from the start that no agreements could be expected to resolve the principal Soviet-American differences, and "the best we can expect is a joint statement that both sides will proceed from the assumption that nuclear war is unacceptable and unwinnable." This in fact, was the one thing that Gorbachev hoped to take home. He was instructed to press the fact that security and nuclear and space weapons were the dominant problems facing both countries.

The memo also warned that "Reagan will repeat his old claims against us" in regional conflicts, so consultations by both countries would at least confirm a Soviet role in these areas. And even if no concrete agreements were reached, "the summit still should end on a mutual note of readiness to keep the dialogue alive... It certainly would not be bad to have a joint document summarizing the results of the summit. But obtaining it should not be an idée fixe. We might do just as well without a final statement."

As is clear from these guidelines given to Gorbachev, Moscow did not pin great hopes on the summit. The minimum program approved by the Politburo authorized him to act at his discretion if circumstances allowed. The ambitious Gorbachev, as we who accompanied him to Geneva knew, had an additional goal: to try to convince Reagan to ban space weapons with a simultaneous reduction of strategic nuclear weapons by half.

On November 17, on the eve of the summit, the New York Times published a secret memorandum by Weinberger for President Reagan. The secretary of defense strongly recommended that the president reject any steps toward disarmament such as a promise to observe the SALT II Treaty or concessions on Star Wars. Weinberger was trying to torpedo the summit at the last moment.

The Geneva Summit

Gorbachev's plane arrived in Geneva at 11:45 A.M. on November 18, and his talks with Reagan began the next day. The talks were the fourteenth summit between Soviet and American leaders since the Teheran meeting of Stalin, Roosevelt, and Churchill in 1943. Gorbachev, at fifty-four, was just beginning his dynamic career as the Soviet leader; Reagan, at seventy-four, was an anti-communist veteran at the height of his presidential glory. Both recognized the deep differences between the Soviet Union and the United States, but both hoped deep down to give a fresh start to relations between their nations. They also shared a total belief in who they were and what they stood for, and in their personal ability to convince others.

But for all their inherent self-confidence, both were somewhat nervous and uneasy, conscious of the responsibilities they carried to that summit. And each had his reasons to try at all costs to make the summit a success, or at least look like a success—Reagan to justify the policies of a lifetime which boiled down to peace through strength, Gorbachev to gain international stature for the reforms upon which he was just embarking.

All this was imprinted on their behavior. They pinned their hopes on their four private talks, including one in a summer cottage on the bank of Lake Geneva. They talked by the fireside in a cozy informal atmosphere. They also took part at the meetings of the two delegations. But more than half the time only the two leaders and their interpreters were involved. This made life miserable for the enormous press corps, which had to live with a news blackout until the end of the summit.

From the very beginning, Reagan demonstrated his singular knack for publicity through the use of the symbols of protocol. The first meeting was to take place on Tuesday, November 19, at Fleur d'Eau, a nineteenth-century lakeside chateau where Reagan was staying. The president was the official host for the first day. It was a cold November morning with a cutting wind blowing off the lake. Gorbachev wore an overcoat and a winter hat. When he arrived, Reagan came out to greet him in a suit without a topcoat or hat, posing together with Gorbachev for photographers. Numerous photos published in the press showed Reagan looking youthful, energetic, and physically strong against Gorbachev, who was bundled up against the cold. They looked the same age. We learned later from Reagan's aides that the president had been waiting for Gorbachev in the hall, also dressed in an overcoat. But as soon as he saw Gorbachev through the window, he pulled off his coat and walked outside to meet the Soviet leader. Reagan's instinct worked, and Gorbachev quickly made a mental note of it. When it was our turn and Reagan came to our residence, Gorbachev also came out coatless to meet him.

So the summit opened at 10:00 A.M. With a half dozen advisers on each side (including foreign ministers) waiting in a separate conference room, Reagan took Gorbachev and their two interpreters into a pale-blue sitting
room for a private conversation. Gorbachev had asked my opinion how best to handle this first important meeting, because I had already had several meetings with Reagan. I told him that first impressions were important to Reagan and could be crucial for their further talks. It was important that Reagan see him first of all in human terms even when they disagreed profoundly. I advised him to use his own sense of humor and at the beginning not to rely too heavily on detailed knowledge of concrete subjects in order not to corner Reagan or embarrass him. Gorbachev himself was a very good actor, and he understood all this quite well.

As a result the initial private meeting of the two leaders lasted more than an hour instead of the planned fifteen minutes. They reviewed their differences freely and agreed, “without formalities” in a frank but friendly manner with a touch of lightheartedness. In general, their first meeting could be considered a success in creating good human chemistry.

Then Gorbachev and Reagan joined their foreign ministers and other experts in the first plenary session in the chateau’s ornate salon. Both leaders expressed with their own eloquence their basic ideological convictions about the Cold War, based on their long-standing contradictory views of each country’s political and social systems. In many aspects it was a repetition of the private correspondence between Reagan and the Soviet leaders during the past five years of his administration. The two leaders, of course, did not convince each other, but the discussion of familiar views was carried on in a businesslike atmosphere without mutual irritation. It was useful for each to listen to the other.

After lunch with their respective staffs, the two leaders got down to work on arms control at the Tuesday afternoon session. It was no surprise that the discussions about SDI and nuclear arms reductions proved complex and difficult. The atmosphere became heated and emotional. Reagan suggested they get a breath of fresh air. Gorbachev quickly agreed and they bundled up against the cold, walked together toward the lake and the waiting summerhouse with its big fireplace, which gave the Geneva meeting the name of “the fireside summit.”

There Reagan handed Gorbachev his proposals in the form of “guidelines” or joint instructions to be issued to our negotiators at the Geneva arms talks. The first point was a fifty percent reduction in strategic forces, to which Gorbachev agreed. The second point was an interim agreement to reduce medium-range nuclear missiles in Europe and eventually eliminate them entirely. Gorbachev raised questions about the role of British and French missiles and airborne nuclear weapons, which Reagan had omitted in his proposals.

But the most controversial point lay in the third proposal for “a greater reliance on defensive systems”—which in Reagan’s language meant SDI and ducked the question of whether they would be covered by the long-standing agreement to limit ABM systems. Worse, the statement seemed to imply that the Soviet Union agreed with SDI in principle and that there might even be some possibility that we would cooperate in this “defense program.” Gorbachev immediately reminded Reagan that it had been agreed at the Shultz-Gromyko meeting in January that there must be an “interrelationship” between cuts in offensive arms and halting weapons in space. Where was this relationship in Reagan’s proposals? The president said he didn’t see that the subjects were linked.

The heated debate between the two lasted an hour by the fireplace. Sensing a deadlock, both decided to drop the question for the moment and return to the residence. On the way back, Reagan asked if they could hold another summit meeting in the United States. Gorbachev immediately accepted, proposing in turn to host the third summit in the Soviet Union. Reagan was pleased to accept. It was an important result. After Gorbachev and his party had departed the president gleefully informed the U.S. team that the next summit meetings were already agreed upon. What is not known to historians who have written about this meeting is that both Reagan and Gorbachev had been prepared for this exchange in advance through the confidential channel. It was one of the rare cases in this administration where it had worked smoothly: well before Geneva, Reagan had let Gorbachev know through me about his proposal for later summits.

Most of those present did not know about the confidential exchange, so they were greatly surprised and much relieved that Gorbachev and Reagan had arranged to hold two additional meetings in both capitals regardless of the results of this one. That important agreement showed the determination of the two leaders to continue and develop their mutual dialogue and search for normal relations. The press broadly welcomed this agreement.

The next day, on Wednesday, November 20, at 11:30 A.M. at the Soviet Mission, Gorbachev and Reagan continued their dispute over space weapons in the presence of their advisers. It was a dramatic encounter between the two leaders. Reagan vehemently defended the SDI program: “It’s not an offensive system. I am talking about a shield, not a spear.” Gorbachev countered that “the reality is that SDI would open a new arms race.”

Gorbachev continued to press Reagan: “Why don’t you believe me when I say the Soviet Union will never attack? . . . Why then should I accept your sincerity in your willingness to share SDI research when you don’t even share your advanced technology with your allies? Let’s be more realistic. We’re prepared to compromise. We’ve said we’ll agree to a separate agreement...”
on intermediate-range missiles. We’ll talk about deep cuts in START. But SDI has got to come to an end.”

There was a long and distressing silence. We participants could see that both leaders were very angry. Gorbachev was the first to realize the need to put down all passion.

“Mr. President,” he said calmly, “I disagree with you, but I can see you really believe it. Maybe this has grown a bit heated. I was just trying to convey to you the depth of our concern on SDI.”

After that session Gorbachev told his advisers that he had decided to cut off the discussion when he realized that there would be no way at this summit to persuade Reagan to drop his SDI research program. He set that task for future summits lest he bring the present one to ruin.

The two leaders discussed other questions, including the controversial problems of regional conflicts and human rights. But these and other questions were of subordinate importance here, mostly because there was not enough time to cover them all—but there were some nuances in the discussion. Reagan as usual strongly denounced the Afghan war. But professional diplomats from the American side were surprised by Gorbachev’s low-key, emotionless defense of Soviet policy in Afghanistan, as if saying that he had no personal responsibility for it. The Soviet side, for its part, noticed that Reagan was far more timid on human rights than the usual American official representatives.

The preparation of the final statement caused serious disagreement. There was a sharp clash between Shultz and Kornienko, who had continued from Gromyko’s regime as Shevardnadze’s first deputy. (Shevardnadze himself was not very active at the Geneva meeting.) A supplementary session of senior diplomats, lasting well into the early hours of the next morning, was needed to devise a compromise. It was reached just several hours before the final meeting of the heads of state, thanks to the intervention of Shultz and Shevardnadze. Reagan took no part in the quibble over the wording which involved genuine disagreements over meaning.

The major point of disagreement centered on the fact that the American side did not want any links between nuclear and space arms, while the Soviet side insisted on it, refusing otherwise to agree to a joint statement. There was also a dispute on whether to mention SDI and the ABM Treaty; ultimately references to both were omitted.

Final compromises on the document were reached at 4:30 A.M., only a few hours before the closing ceremony at 10:00 A.M. On arms issues the U.S. team agreed to fall back on the language of Gromyko and Shultz on January 8, which at first the Americans did not even want to repeat. The final statement on these issues said:

The president and the General Secretary discussed the negotiations on nuclear and space arms. They agreed to accelerate the work at these negotiations, with a view to accomplishing the task set down in the Joint U.S.-Soviet Agreement on January 8, 1985, namely to prevent an arms race in space and terminate it on earth, to limit and reduce nuclear arms and enhance strategic stability.

The diplomatic draftsmen produced a reasonably good document, the first of its kind between Washington and Moscow while Reagan was in the White House. The joint statement was a major political document declaring that a nuclear war should never be unleashed and was unwinnable. Both sides stressed the importance of preventing any war between them, whether nuclear or conventional, and declared that they would not seek military superiority. From our point of view, the minimal program outlined in the Politburo memorandum to Gorbachev was fulfilled. Besides, Shultz and Shevardnadze signed an agreement on scientific, educational, and cultural exchanges, the result of two hundred hours of previous negotiations in sixty-five meetings over fifteen months.

Gorbachev made a surprise move by agreeing to include in the final statement a phrase committing us to “resolving humanitarian cases in the spirit of cooperation.” Thus, for the first time in a joint document, we gave some sign of a shift on this vexed question of human rights.

Because of our radical differences about SDI, the final statement essentially ignored it. Gorbachev believed that Reagan’s dogged commitment to the project blocked progress toward strategic arms reductions. Although Shultz said that after the heated discussion about SDI he felt Gorbachev finally accepted the inevitability of research on it, the truth is that Gorbachev did not accept it at all and recognized that the best they could do at Geneva was to agree to disagree. The summit had made no progress toward Gorbachev’s principal goal of halting Star Wars, and its promises of nuclear arms reduction therefore were vague. Gorbachev hoped that in time he would manage to overcome or somehow weaken Reagan’s stubborn position. So he played for time in arranging the next summit in Washington, but he did not want to come home empty-handed. He therefore arranged an interim meeting in Reykjavik the following year, which only confirmed once again that it was anything but easy to shake Reagan’s determination to realize his Star Wars dream.

I came away from the Geneva summit with a somewhat different and more uncomfortable impression, which was that Gorbachev had gotten himself unreasonably fixated on American military research on space weapons and converted it into a precondition for summit success. Reagan thus drove us into a deadlock, and later we ourselves had to search for an exit.
Looking back on the many summits in which I participated, I must admit that the first meeting between Gorbachev and Reagan was quite extraordinary. No joint documents were prepared beforehand, and their differences on the principal questions of arms control were so large that it was virtually impossible to agree on how to structure the conversation in advance in order to facilitate a discussion of this complex issue in an orderly manner. As a result, they eventually had no choice but to agree to regard the summit as a get-acquainted meeting. It turned out to be a first step in the process of cooperation, which was completely new to them.

Reagan and Gorbachev virtually refused to follow the agenda that had been prepared by their aides and instead engaged in a free-form discussion. Given the historical background, they were probably right. It served them well in avoiding an impasse on things they could not possibly resolve and thus avoided personal confrontation, which was especially important for their first meeting.

Coupled with the agreement to meet again and the final statement on nuclear war, this represented no small advance. Through the establishment of the first personal relationship with a Soviet leader during the five years of Reagan’s presidency, a certain psychological barrier was overcome, first of all by Reagan himself with the realization that it was possible to do business directly with the Soviet leadership and the evil empire, after all. This laid foundations for further advances, although the relations themselves remained complex. The first Reagan-Gorbachev summit could therefore be considered a success. It was not a strategic breakthrough, but it did unquestionably yield a certain moral and political benefit and paved the way for the summits that followed. I got the impression, as I observed both leaders, that they had found ways of communicating with each other.

On the plane home Gorbachev said that Reagan had impressed him as a complex and contradictory person, sometimes frankly speaking his mind, as when he defended SDI, and sometimes, as usual, harping on propaganda dogmas in which he also believed. He was stubborn and very conservative. But still Gorbachev found it possible to establish contact with him and discovered a man who was not as hopeless as some believed. And to Gorbachev that meant he was ready to work with him.

Reagan’s entourage left no doubt that he came away with a positive impression of Gorbachev as a leader who differed from all predecessors and was even ready by their second mutual dinner in Geneva to address him by first name, a typical American accolade of friendship. (Cautious aides told him he had better wait a bit.) The White House triumphantly presented the “fireside summit” to the public through the mass media, and Reagan gave a dramatic and favorable report to Congress. The president’s approval rating in the polls promptly hit its high mark of 84 percent, a point not lost among the political ideologues in the White House.

In Moscow, the Politburo devoted a special session to the results. Gorbachev was palpably pleased to report on his talks and share his vivid personal impressions; after all, it was the first meeting for any of our leaders with the notoriously anti-Soviet American president.

Gromyko was the first to congratulate Gorbachev on the skillful and successful accomplishment of his difficult mission in Geneva. Other members of the Politburo followed Gromyko’s example, more by tradition of praising a general secretary than by conviction. Only the minister of defense and chairman of the KGB, despite their praise, added that Reagan was still Reagan and we should be vigilant in dealing with him. Gorbachev readily agreed, saying that his meeting in Geneva was not yet a breakthrough but, hopefully, the beginning of better relations with Reagan, which we should explore and develop. His main hope in making the Cold War die gradually was in agreeing with the United States to reduce and finally end the arms race. After a lively discussion, the Politburo formally noted the positive significance of the meeting and subscribed to the policy of persisting in efforts to develop our relations with the Reagan administration. A special mention was made about the value of new summits, and in his report to the Supreme Soviet session on November 27, Gorbachev publicly described the Geneva meeting as “necessary and useful.”

In the course of the summit Gorbachev successfully shaped and demonstrated his personal style of conducting diplomatic talks, even though at the time, he had no coherent political program and had not yet thought through his concepts of security in relation to the United States. The most important thing was his adoption of a course of cooperation with Reagan which was also endorsed by his political colleagues. This led to profound changes in Soviet-American relations later. Last but not least, Gorbachev and Reagan also reached a mutual if tacit understanding that the spirit of Geneva should not be allowed to vanish into thin air.